DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 470 271 UD 035 343

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TITLE	Critical Trends in Urban Education: Fifth Biennial Survey of America's Great City Schools.
INSTITUTION	Council of the Great City Schools, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2002-10-00
NOTE	17p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Council of the Great City Schools, 1301 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W. Suite 702, Washington, DC 20004. Tel: 202-393-2427; Fax: 202-393-2400; Web site: http://www.cgcs.org.
PUB TYPE	Numerical/Quantitative Data (110) -- Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS
DESCRIPTORS	Administrator Attitudes; *Educational Change; Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Faculty Development; *Public Schools; *Urban Schools

ABSTRACT

This report presents the fifth in a series of polls that ask leaders in major U.S. urban public school systems about challenges they face and expectations for the future. The polls survey board members, superintendents, and other leadership staff. In January 2002, surveys were mailed to Great City School district leaders and senior staff and board members. The survey asked how respondents described their sense of optimism about the future of urban public schools, how much overall help the school system received from specified groups, the 10 most important needs in the urban school district, which measures the district had pursued in its general reform process, and the top three most effective educational reform strategies. Respondents were optimistic about the future of urban schools. Approximately half felt that foundations and business leaders were helping their schools. They listed religious organizations among the most helpful groups. The most critical issues they confronted were academic achievement, closing achievement gaps, and principal leadership. The most common reform efforts listed were professional development and efforts to boost student reading performance. (Contains 5 tables, 5 figures, and 5 references.)(SM)

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CRITICAL TRENDS IN URBAN EDUCATION

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October 2002

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Critical Trends in Urban Education:
Fifth Biennial Survey of America's Great City Schools

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Critical Trends in Urban Education: Fifth Biennial Survey of America's Great City Schools

October, 2002

Introduction

Americans rely on public schools to educate and prepare almost 50 million students to become productive members of our society. Yet, many of our public schools, particularly those in our Great Cities, face significant challenges: over-crowded classrooms, teacher quality and shortages, low student achievement, access to pre-school, and aging facilities.

This report is the fifth in a series of polls that survey the leadership of America's major urban public school systems about the challenges they face and their expectations for the future. The poll surveys board members, superintendents, and other leadership staff. In January 2002, surveys were mailed to Great City School district leaders. Superintendents and Board Representatives were also asked to distribute the surveys to their senior staff and to all board members. Surveys were also distributed at Council meetings held in January and February of 2002. Approximately 526 people responded.

The first report, published in 1994, asked a series of questions about the needs of urban schools and compared the results with national trends published by Phi Delta Kappa in 1993. This poll does not make any comparisons between urban schools and national averages. It does, however, provide trend data comparing this year's data with the results, where appropriate, from the four previous polls (1993-94, 1995-96,1997-98, and 1999-00). These comparisons allow us to examine important trends in urban school leadership, needs, and reform strategies.

Critical Trends 2002 asked persons to respond to five items:

- How would you describe your sense of optimism about the future of urban public schools?
- Rate the overall help the school system receives from specified groups.
- Identify what you believe to be the ten most important or pressing needs of your urban school district.
- Which of the following measures has your district pursued in its general reform process?
- Rate the top three most effective educational reform strategies.

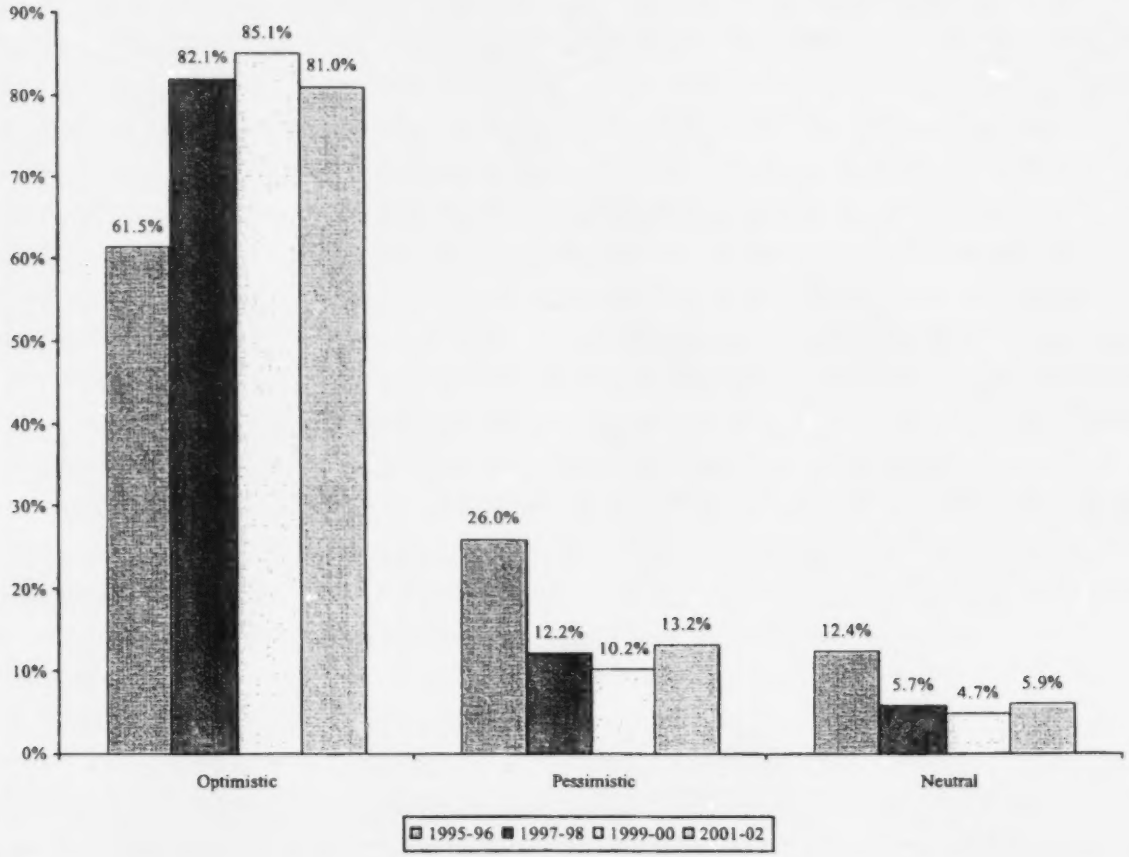
Hope for the Future

Urban school leaders face an enormous number of challenges in their districts. But are urban leaders hopeful and optimistic about the future of their institution and the work they are doing?

The survey asked: *How would you describe your sense of optimism about the future of urban public schools?* Respondents answered on a five-point scale ranging from "optimistic" (5) to "pessimistic" (1). Figure 1 displays the results.

Figure 1

Hope for the Future of Urban Schools
(1995-96, 1997-98, 1999-00, and 2001-2002)



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- 81.0% of respondents indicated that they were either "optimistic" (35.5%) or "somewhat optimistic" (45.5%) about the future of urban schools. Urban leaders have become steadily more optimistic, with these numbers having risen from 61.5% in 1995-96. The optimism of education leaders has declined somewhat from 85.1% in 1999-00 to 81.0% in 2001-02.

- Only 5.9% indicated that they were "neutral" about the future of urban education, compared with 12.4% in 1995-96, 5.7% in 1997-98, and 4.7% in 1999-00.

- Some 13.2% of leaders said they were either "pessimistic" (2.4%) or "somewhat pessimistic" (10.8%). The percentage of persons indicating pessimism has declined from 26.0% in 1995-96.

- The percentage of leaders who said they were either "pessimistic" or "somewhat pessimistic" increased slightly from 10.2% in 1999-00 to 13.2% in 2001-02.

Helpfulness of Others

The challenges faced by urban public schools often necessitate collaboration with others. The federal government, state governments, community groups, businesses, and colleges and universities are just a few of the networks that support urban schools. How do urban school leaders perceive the degree to which these groups are helpful to urban school improvement?

The survey asked urban school leaders: *How would you rate the overall help the school system receives in pursuing its mission from the following groups?* Respondents rated 17 groups, organizations, and governmental agencies on a five-point scale ranging from "very helpful" (5) to "very unhelpful" (1). Figure 2 displays the percentage of persons who rated each group "very helpful" or "helpful" in the 2001-2002 survey. Table 1 lists and compares these groups in order from most to least helpful.

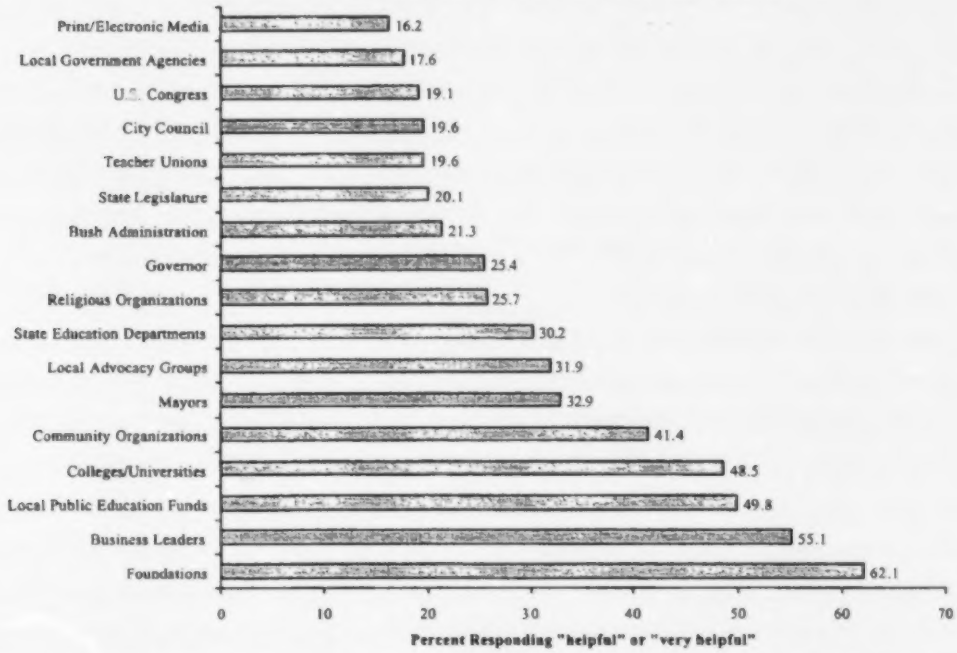
- More than six out of ten respondents felt that foundations (62.1%) and five out of ten felt that business leaders (55.1%) were benefiting their schools, giving these two groups the highest rankings in the 2001-2002 survey. Foundations, business leaders and local education funds have remained among the top three most helpful groups for the third consecutive poll.

- Local public education funds (49.8%), colleges and universities (48.5%) and community organizations (41.4%) continue to receive favorable rankings and have been listed among the top five most favorable groups during the 1997-98, 1999-2000 and 2001-2002 surveys.

- Urban school leaders ranked religious organizations among the ten most helpful groups in the 2001-2002 poll. This rating increased from the 1999-2000 survey when this group was ranked as the 13th most helpful.

Figure 2

Helpfulness of Groups to Urban Schools (2001-2002)



- State education departments continue to receive less favorable rankings, dropping from fifth in 1995-96, to ninth in 1997-98, to tenth in 1999-2000. They are rated as the eighth most favorable group according to the 2001-2002 poll.

- The U.S. Congress (19.1%), local government agencies (17.6%), and print/electronic media (16.2%) received the lowest rankings, with fewer than one-fifth of all respondents in the 2001-2002 survey indicating that they were helpful.

Table 1

Comparison of Group Helpfulness by Rank Order (1995-96, 1997-98, 1999-00, and 2001-2002)

Organization	01-02	99-00	97-98	95-96
Foundations	1	2	1	•
Business Leaders	2	1	3	1
Local Public Education Funds	3	3	2	2
Colleges/Universities	4	4	5	3
Community Organizations	5	5	4	•
Mayors	6	•	6	•
Local Advocacy Groups	7	8	7	4
State Education Departments	8	10	9	5
Religious Organizations	9	•	•	•
Governor	10	•	•	•

• Not included in given year or presented in a different manner.

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Most Important Needs

Urban school leaders encounter a myriad of issues including declining tax bases, meeting the needs of English Language Learners (ELL), transitory student populations, and an increasing teacher shortage. Which needs, however, do urban school leaders consider to be the most critical?

The survey asked urban school leaders to: *Identify what you believe to be the ten (10) most important or pressing needs of your urban school district.* The survey provided 46 items from which the respondents could choose. Table 2 displays the top ten needs in 2001-2002 and compares them with needs from the four previous surveys. Figure 3 ranks all the needs listed by urban educators in the 2001-2002 survey.

- Academic achievement was ranked as the most pressing need by 77.8% of the urban leaders in the 2001-2002 survey. Academic achievement remained the number one need for the *fourth* consecutive poll.
- Urban school leaders ranked closing achievement gaps (65.9%) as the second most important need this year, as compared to fifth and ninth in the 1999-00 and 1997-98 polls, respectively.
- Principal leadership (62.8%) was ranked as the third most important need for the 2001-02 survey. This was not rated in previous surveys.

Table 2
Top Ten Needs of Urban Schools

Need	01-02	99-00	97-98	95-96	93-94
Academic Achievement	1	1	1	1	8
Closing Achievement Gaps	2	5	9	7	*
Principal Leadership	3	*	*	*	*
Recruiting Teachers	4	2	9	14	*
Teacher Retention	5	*	*	*	*
Professional Development	6	3	3	6	*
School Finance	7	8	4	2	7
Parental Involvement	8	6.5	2	3	2
Reduce Class Size	9	6.5	6	*	*
Public Confidence	10	4	2	4	*

* Not rated in given year or presented in a different manner.

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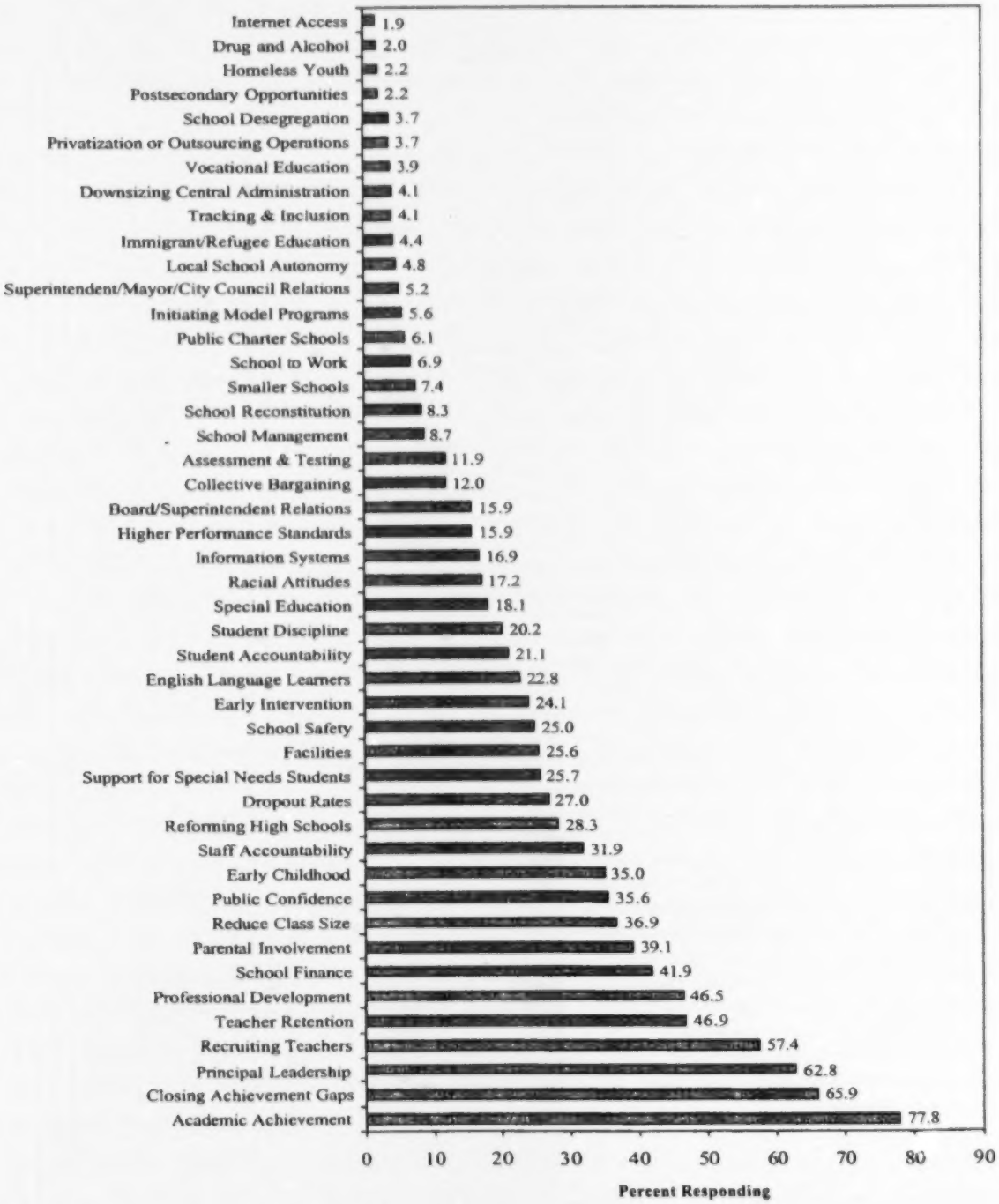
Figure 3

Urban School Needs (2001-2002)



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Most Common Urban School Reform Strategies

Urban educators are often the leaders in school reform. Which reform strategies do urban school leaders use the most?

Urban school leaders were asked: *Which of the following measures has your district pursued in its general reform process?* The survey listed 29 education reform strategies and allowed respondents to check as many as apply to their district. Figure 4 displays the results from the 2001-2002 poll. Figure 5 and Table 3 show comparisons with previous surveys.

- More than eight out of ten respondents stated that their school districts use professional development (87.1%) and efforts to boost student reading performance (86.0%) as their two most commonly used reform strategies in the 2001-2002 poll.

- Professional development remains one of urban leaders' two most popular reforms for the *fourth* consecutive survey.

- The percent of urban school leaders reporting that they are reducing class size increased by over forty percent, from 47.5% in 1997-98 to 67.0% in 2001-2002. Reducing class sizes rose from only the 12th most popular reform in 1997-98 to the sixth most common strategy in the 1999-2000 poll. However, reducing class sizes declined to the eighth most common reform strategy in 2001-2002.

- Professional development, higher performance standards, and enhancing partnerships with business and community leaders have all ranked among the top five most common reform strategies in at least three of the last four surveys.

- The percentage of persons who indicated that their districts were using partnerships with business leaders decreased from 86.1% in 1997-98 to 76.3% in 1999-2000 and to 73.7% in 2001-2002.

- Approximately three-fourths of urban leaders stated that their district was working to improve principal leadership (74.1%) and partnerships with business/community leaders (73.7%).

Figure 4

Urban School Reform Strategies (2001-2002)

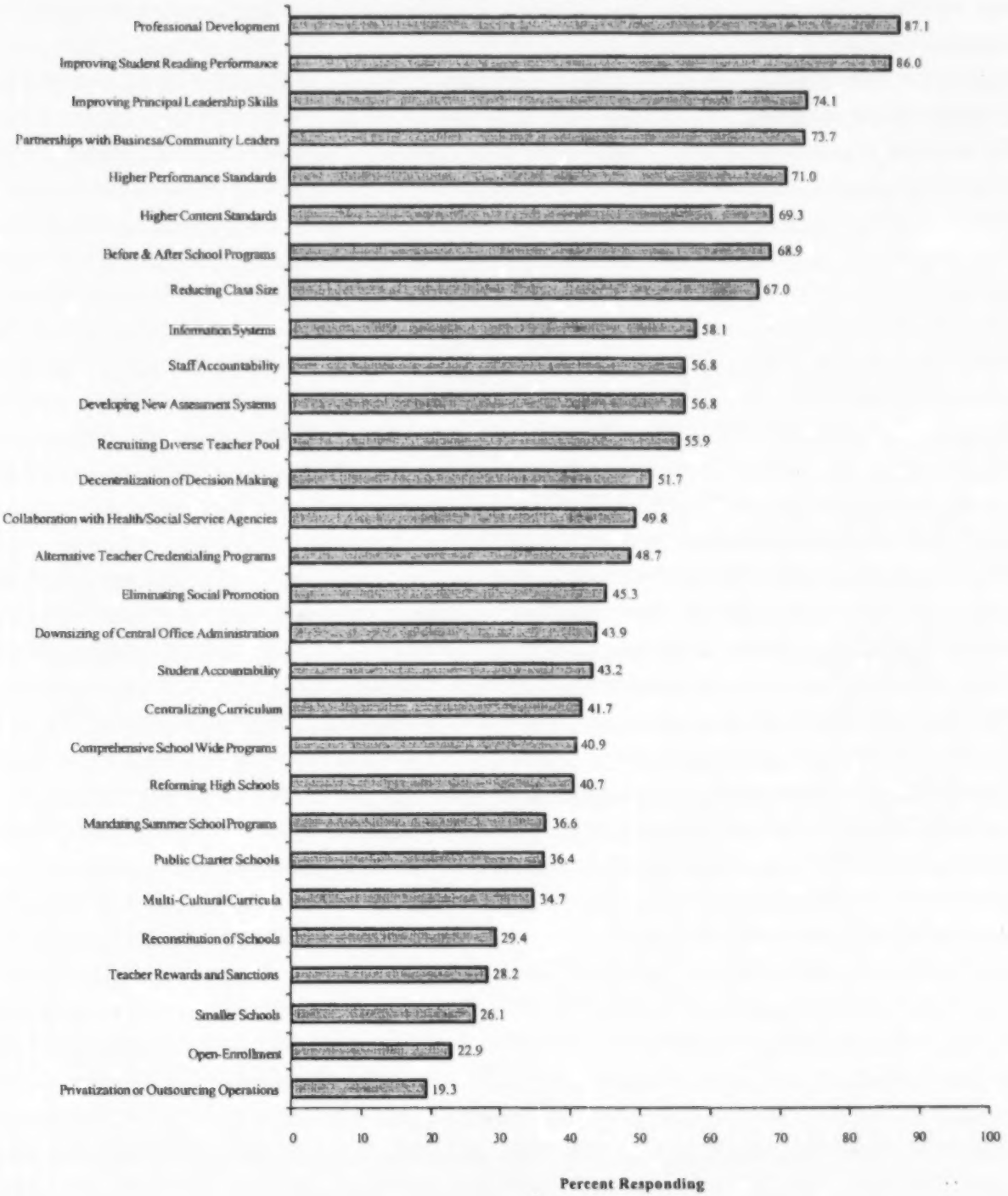
Professional Development 87.1
Improving Student Reading Performance 86.0
Improving Principal Leadership Skills 74.1
Partnerships with Business/Community Leaders 73.7
Higher Performance Standards 71.0
Higher Content Standards 69.3
Before & After School Programs 68.9
Reducing Class Size 67.0
Information Systems 58.1
Staff Accountability 56.8
Developing New Assessment Systems 56.8
Recruiting Diverse Teacher Pool 55.9
Decentralization of Decision Making 51.7
Collaboration with Health/Social Service Agencies 49.8
Alternative Teacher Credentialing Programs 48.7
Eliminating Social Promotion 45.3
Downsizing of Central Office Administration 43.9
Student Accountability 43.2
Centralizing Curriculum 41.7
Comprehensive School Wide Programs 40.9
Reforming High Schools 40.7
Mandating Summer School Programs 36.6
Public Charter Schools 36.4
Multi-Cultural Curricula 34.7
Reconstitution of Schools 29.4
Teacher Rewards and Sanctions 28.2
Smaller Schools 26.1
Open-Enrollment 22.9
Privatization or Outsourcing Operations 19.3
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
Percent Responding

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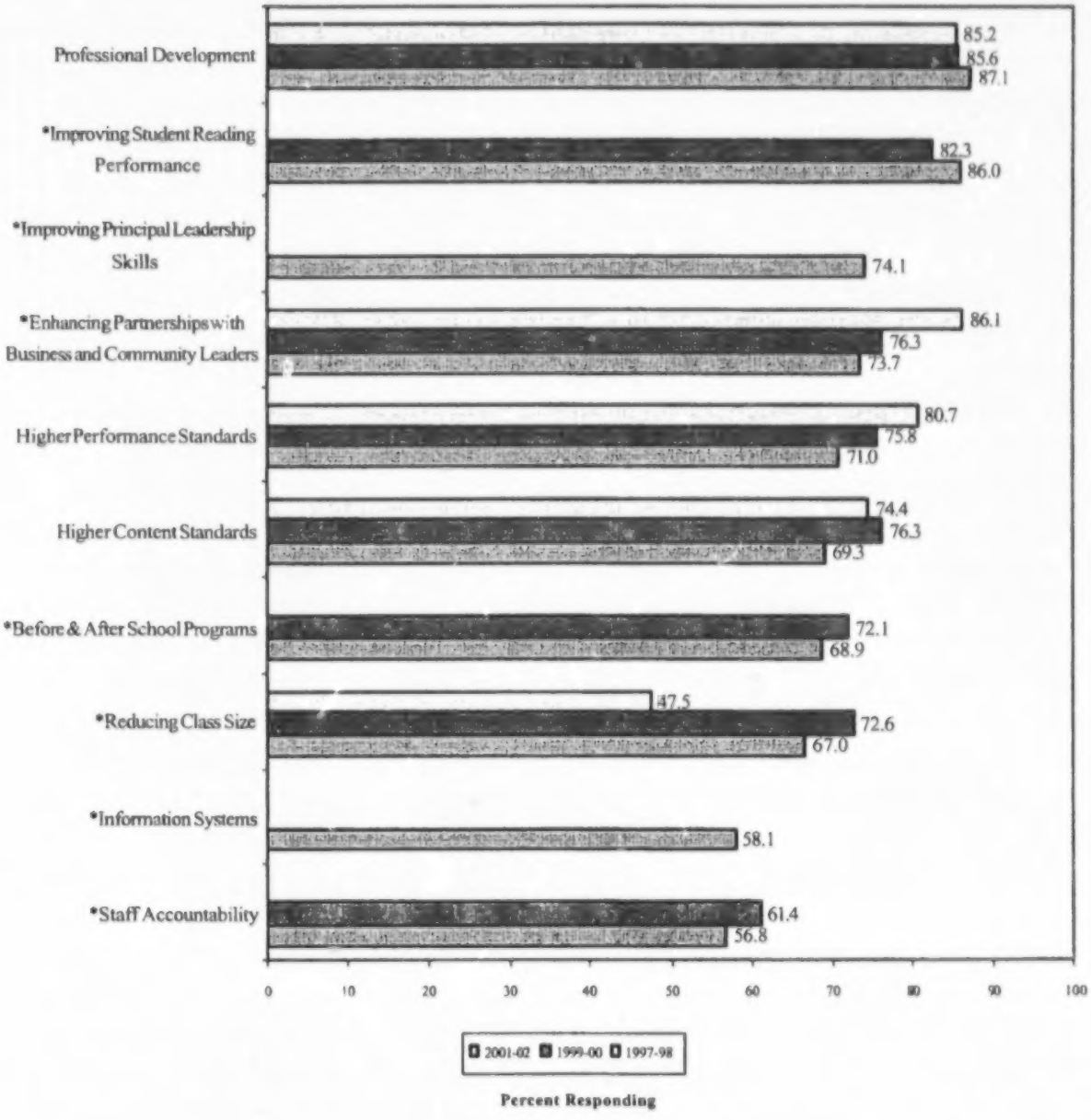
Figure 5

Urban School Reform Strategies (1997-98, 1999-00, and 2001-2002)



* Not rated in all years or presented in different manner.

Table 3

Rank Order of Commonly Used Urban School Reform Strategies

Reform Strategy	01-02	99-00	97-98	95-96
Professional Development	1	1	2	1
Improving Student Reading Performance	2	2	*	*
Improving Principal Leadership Skills	3	*	*	*
Enhancing Partnerships with Business/Community Leaders	4	3.5	1	*
Higher Performance Standards	5	5	3	*
Higher Content Standards	6	3.5	5	4
Before & After School Programs	7	7	*	*
Reducing Class Size	8	6	12	*
Information Systems	9	*	*	*
Staff Accountability	10.5	9	*	*
Developing New Assessment Systems	10.5	12	9	*

* Not rated in given year or presented in a different manner.

Most Effective Urban School Reform Strategies

The short-lived nature of some educational reforms indicates that these practices have varying degrees of success. Which strategies do urban school leaders perceive as the most effective in their districts?

The survey asked respondents to: *Rate the top three strategies that you perceive as the most effective in achieving your education reform goals.* Twenty-nine strategies were presented with the option to identify others. Tables 4 and 5 display the results. The ranking was developed by computing the number of "top three" votes each reform strategy received.

- Professional development was cited as the single most effective reform in the 1997-98, 1999-2000 and 2001-2002 polls. It was rated the second most effective reform in the 1995-96 poll.

- The perception of decentralized decision making as a viable reform strategy has continued to decline, as its ranking dropped from third in 1995-96, to fourth in 1997-98, to ninth in 1999-2000, and to thirteenth in the 2001-2002 survey results.

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Table 4

Most Effective Reform Strategies (2001-2002)

Reform Strategy	Ranking
Professional Development	1
Improving Student Reading Performance	2
Improving Principal Leadership Skills	3
Higher Performance Standards	4
Staff Accountability	5
Reducing Class Size	6
Higher Content Standards	7
Student Accountability	8
Comprehensive School Wide Programs	9
Recruiting Diverse Teacher Pool	10

Table 5

Comparison of Most Effective Reform Strategies (1995-96, 1997-98, 1999-00, and 2001-2002)

Reform Strategy	95-96	97-98	99-00	01-02
*Higher Performance Standards	1	3	4	5
Professional Development	2	1	1	1
Decentralized Decision Making	3	4	9	13
New Assessment Systems	4	8	10	23
On-Line Technology	5	9	21	*
Alternative Governance & Management	6	*	*	*

* Not included in given year or presented in a different manner.

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Discussion

This poll asked how urban school leaders feel about such important issues as the future of urban education, the degree of helpfulness their schools receive from outside groups, the most pressing urban school needs, the most effective reform strategies, and the perceived effectiveness of these reform efforts.

1. Urban school leaders continue to feel strongly optimistic about the future of urban schools. Although there was a slight decline in this year's poll, the overall results show that urban leaders are optimistic about the future.

This survey does not examine why these respondents maintain a strong sense of hope about the future of urban education. However, these results may reflect a continued confidence that urban schools are making steady improvements in test scores. Urban school leaders appear to believe that the current reforms and improvement strategies are making a difference for their school systems.

2. Business leaders, foundations, and local education funds continue to be viewed as the most helpful groups to urban public schools. These organizations give assistance, coordination, and funding for programs that often directly enhance educational opportunities for students.

The U.S. Congress, local government agencies, and print/electronic media received the lowest ratings. The leaders' perceptions of both the print/electronic media demonstrate the powerful, and often negative, impact these mediums have on our nation's schools.

Public involvement is crucial to the success of urban public education. It is clear that many groups are contributing to this process. The Council would need to ask its members how these groups have proven helpful in subsequent surveys. Are there specific programs, models, and strategies that are particularly successful? Can these models inform practices? What types of assistance do urban school leaders want from these groups?

3. Improving academic achievement was cited as the number one need in urban public schools for the fourth consecutive survey. The need to improve students' academic performance is urban education's bottom line. Meeting this goal will become ever more crucial as districts and states work to implement "No Child Left Behind."

Professional development and public confidence remain among the top most pressing needs. Parental involvement remained in the top ten, but it fell from the sixth most important need to the eighth. Closing achievement gaps has become a much more significant need during the 2001-2002 school year, receiving a second place ranking.

Principal leadership was ranked as the third most important need. This is the first time this issue was included on a Council poll.

4. Urban schools are often engaged in numerous reform efforts, including many that are not listed in this survey. Professional development has remained among the top two most popular reform strategies during the last four polls. This survey, however, did not ask urban educators what *types* of professional development that their districts needed most.

Leaders who report using decentralized decision making have steadily decreased during the last three surveys, dropping from the second most popular reform in the 1995-96 poll to the fourth in the 1997-98 survey. The 2001-2002 results rank decentralized decision making as only the 13th most popular reform strategy. Current local reforms have shifted away from school based decision making toward more uniform content standards, assessment and accountability.

Class size reduction has become increasingly more popular in urban schools since the 1995-96 school year. The number of leaders who report using this reform increased by over forty percent between 1995-96 and 2001-2002.

5. Respondents stated that professional development, enhancing student reading performance, and improving principal leadership skills were their districts' most effective reforms. Professional development has remained one of the two most effective reforms for the four most recent surveys.

Higher performance standards and higher content standards were both listed among the top ten most effective reform strategies. These two strategies reflect the current wave of standards-based reform in the educational community.

In conclusion, the results of this survey indicate that urban school leaders are utilizing a variety of educational reform strategies to combat the challenging and pressing needs in their districts. Despite the obstacles, the leaders in our nation's urban schools remain overwhelmingly optimistic about the future of their schools.

Technical Notes

Number and Percent of Survey Respondents

Group	Number	Percent
School Board Member	70	13.3
Superintendent	25	4.8
Deputy/Assistant/Associate Superintendent	215	40.9
Other Educator	133	25.3
College Representative	14	2.7
Other	69	13.1
Total	**526**	**100.1***

* Total percentage greater than 100 due to rounding.

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Acknowledgements

The Council of the Great City Schools would like to thank National Computer Systems for their generous technical assistance.

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